

## Parents and their children working together: A Scaffolding Literacy case study

Beverley Axford

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA

*Can struggling and marginalised students be more effectively brought into school literacy by teaching a 'significant other' (parent or carer) how to more successfully work with them on literacy tasks? This article looks at this question by drawing on a study of parents and carers who took part in the Parents as Tutors Program, a university-based literacy intervention that takes parents and carers through a series of eight two-hour parent/carer seminars and twelve one-hour one-on-one tutorials in which each adult + child work with a trained tutor who models the strategies taught in the seminars. This paper describes the program offered to parents/carers and their children, and draws on the results of an evaluation of parents' perceptions of the value of the program for their families carried out in 2005. The paper argues that such interventions can be effective, but only when they provide both the adult and child with a new set of practices that emphasise the purposefulness and human intent of literacy engagement, and provide the adult and child with a new way to work on reading and writing tasks together.*

### Introduction

The *Parents as Tutors Program* has a long history of working with parents alongside their children. Commenced in the early 1980s, the program has provided a major literacy research site spanning two decades (see Kemp, 1987; Kemp, 1985a; Kemp, 1980; Gray & Cowey, 2000; Gray & Cowey, 2003; Gray, Cowey & Axford, 2003). The current program draws on the *Scaffolding Literacy* teaching method developed in the period 1992–2003 by Gray and Cowey as part of a DEST (Australian Department of Education, Science and Training) funded project aimed at improving literacy outcomes for Indigenous students in rural and regional schools (Gray, Cowey & Axford, 2003). Since 2003, Gray and Cowey have extended their work with Indigenous students through the DEST-funded *National Accelerated Literacy Program* (Cowey, 2005).

Meanwhile, the *Parents as Tutors Program* has continued to operate within the ACT. The teaching approach used in the program has consistently demonstrated measured improvements in the literacy outcomes of students using pre- and post-program reading tests on benchmarked texts. These

results are reported in annual reports of the program (see, for example, Schools & Community Centre, 2004). Through these pre- and post- assessments, it is clear that younger students generally make 1–2 Year level gains, while older students (Year 4 and above) gain 2–3 Year levels. However, these are results obtained within the timeframe of the intervention itself and could be accounted for in terms of the impact of participation in a one-on-one intervention *per se*. As the evaluation of the Australian Government's 'Pilot Tutorial Voucher Initiative' (TVI) demonstrates, even a relatively short period of one-on-one tuition can have a positive effect on students (Erebus International, 2006). The TVI initiative provided out-of-school tutorial assistance to approximately 6,200 of the 19,000 children identified as not having reached the national Year 3 reading benchmarks in 2003. The initiative was delivered through a complex administrative system that provided eligible families with a \$700 voucher. In spite of the administrative complexity and variable delivery of the TVI, the evaluators are still able to identify positive opportunities that the tuition provided the children who participated. These included the opportunity:

to learn without distractions and so be able to develop greater concentration and focus on learning; to learn without the concern of being humiliated, embarrassed or laughed at, therefore encouraging increased self esteem and self confidence; and to be fully engaged in learning activities for more sustained periods of time. (Erebus International, 2006, p. 8)

However, whether these 'opportunities' translate into changes in learning behaviours that are sustained beyond the life of the intervention is another question. The TVI evaluators make the point that:

Whether these gains can be sustained over the longer term without further intervention is another significant question that requires further research. (Erebus International, 2006, p. 17)

The following account of the *Parents as Tutors Program* makes some contribution to this question of whether it is possible to develop literacy interventions that are sustainable over time.

The *Parents as Tutors Program* assumes that building this sustainability can be achieved in situations in which at least one significant adult in the child's life is able to learn to work more constructively with that child. In 2005 a formal university-funded evaluation of parents' perceptions of the value of the program for their family was undertaken. This evaluation drew on the 2004 cohort of families (Axford, 2005). In what follows, feedback received through the 2005 study is used to argue that children at risk of failing to develop age-appropriate literacy skills benefit from one-on-one support from adults who are able and willing to provide consistent support. However, the support these adults provide needs to not only be consistent over time, but able to provide useful and reliable feedback that provides the

child with information about how to master literacy tasks. This requires that the adults understand both (i) the stress that struggling or confused learners are under and the impact this has on their learning strategies and abilities, and (ii) the nature of the literacy tasks themselves.

### *The theoretical basis of the program*

The *Parents as Tutors Program* teaches parents and carers how to use a set of teaching strategies that are highly explicit and disciplined (not haphazard) and that integrate reading, spelling and writing. These strategies rely for their success on 'scaffolding' the learner in a way that enables him or her to work on age appropriate and 'literate' texts – that is, texts with more complex narrative and language structures than those typically found in 'remedial' texts that employ simple one-word or single-phrase 'sentences'. Working on more age-appropriate texts has the effect of building the learner's self esteem and motivation (or, conversely, counteracting many of the negative learning strategies the children have adopted). At the same time, working on age-appropriate texts reflects the theoretical assumption that mastery cannot be gained by merely practicing tasks at the level at which the learner can already work. Drawing largely on the work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978), it is assumed that learning takes place in that 'zone' between what a child can do independently (their 'actual developmental level') and their level of potential development 'as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). For a discussion of Vygotsky's theory of proximal development see also Hammond and Gibbons (2001, pp. 9–12).

This program builds on this assumption that learning takes place at a level beyond that which a child can currently do independently by structuring teaching around a set of strategies that quickly get children working on texts that would be beyond their independent reading level, but that they can read when given high levels of adult (teacher or parent/carer) support. Once they can read a piece of text at this supported level, the text then becomes a resource for further work on comprehension and language structure, and for more detailed language work – on spelling and punctuation for example – and on into 'text patterning' and reconstructed writing.

Finally, the evaluation of the *Parents as Tutors Program* indicates that its strength lies in the mix of 'supported success' provided to both the adult and child. The combination of adult seminars and adult + child tutorials encourages the adults and children to learn new ways to engage with, and talk about, text. It is the development of this new 'dialogue' that helps explain the strong support the program receives from families. In this sense, this program lends support to those who argue that literacy learning is first and foremost a social practice and not merely a set of technical (decoding) skills.

From a sociological perspective the program can be said to provide a rich illustration of the extent to which 'learning to be literate' is a 'communicative action' rather than an 'instrumental action' (Habermas 1968/1976, p. 191). Feedback from parents and carers can be used to demonstrate that sustainable changes are achieved in situations in which adult and child are able to build up a new dialogue about the nature of the literacy tasks the child needs to undertake. In this program this dialogue is built up through an emphasis on author intentionality and the purposefulness and human intent that underlies reading and writing as acts of communication rather than as bundles of technical competencies.

### *Access to the program*

The *Parents as Tutors Program* is a joint initiative of the School of Education and Community Studies at the University of Canberra (UC) and the ACT Department of Education and Training (ACTDET). ACTDET provides the tutors from their permanent teaching staff. The Department also provides a yearly operational grant. This grant enables this university-based program to be offered to ACT families without imposing an individual tuition fee and hence enables access in situations where the cost of out-of-school tuition (not to mention a university-based program) would be prohibitive. To access the program, the child must be enrolled in a school in the ACT and families must include in their application a referral from their school and appropriate school assessment information.

Typically, children accessing the program range from Year 2 (which, in Australia, means that they have completed the first two years of schooling – a 'Preparation' year and Year 1) to Year 10 (the final year of compulsory schooling). A profile of the children who attended the program in 2004 is provided in Table 1 as an example of the age, gender, school level and type of school attended, of the children entering the program. The 2004 profile is provided here because it is these families who were surveyed in 2005. Parents' evaluative comments quoted below are all drawn from this survey data. Table 1 shows that the number of places provided in the program and the number of families differ. This is because some families, judged to need further support, are offered places in an extension program. In 2004, the actual number of families in the program equalled 88. Of these, 51 (58 per cent of the cohort) responded to the 2005 survey (Axford, 2005).

Features of note shown in Table 1 are typical of each year's intake:

- The gender breakdown: the ratio of boys to girls referred to the program is typically 3:1.
- Most referrals are from government primary schools.
- While not shown in Table 1, a significant number of enrolments in 2004 were for children in Years 4 and above (45 per cent of places in the main

**Table 1.** 2004 enrolments in the Parents as Tutors Program. (Axford, 2005, p. 3)

Total number of places offered	108
Total number of families	88
<i>Gender</i>	
Male students	82
Female students	26
<i>School level</i>	
Secondary	8
Primary	100
Government schools	97
Non-government	10
Home school	1
Children assessed as 'special needs'	32

program were taken by children in Year 4 or above). This too is typical. Priority enrolment is given to older students, as their needs are assessed to be more urgent. It has also been observed that these students often make the greatest gains in the shortest time when tested using pre- and post-program reading scores on standard benchmarked texts. This appears to be, in part, because they come with broader general knowledge that they can apply to understanding context once basic decoding skills are addressed. It is assumed from this that the *Scaffolding Literacy* method used in the program would be appropriate for secondary students. The work of Culican, Milburn and Oakley (2006) bears this out. It is also assumed that this method would be suitable for adult learners, though this has not yet been empirically tested.

- The high number of children with special needs: the *Parents as Tutors Program* is not a 'special needs' program and the teaching sequence is not modified for these children although, depending on the kind of disability, they often need more than twelve weeks of one-on-one tutorials before measurable progress begins to be made. This helps explain the need for the extension program.

It should also be noted that this is a demanding program for the parents/carers as well as the children. The course runs for 18 weeks and the adults must attend 28 hours of 'class-time', made up of 16 hours of seminars

and 12 hours of tutorials. The seminars are held in the evenings and repeated again the following morning. Tutorials are held during school hours, so parents must collect their child from school, attend the university for the tutorial, and return the child to school. Even so, attendance is very high. Two or three families a year pull out or defer. This is usually because of some family crisis – a sudden illness or death in the family, family break-up or family relocation. Why parents make this kind of commitment is captured in the following assessment made by a parent in the 2004 program:

My child would not have been helped so much without doing it [the program]. I would not have been so aware of where my child was at with her reading and writing or how to help her so effectively without it.

The tutor we had was exceptional.

The traveling was a sacrifice and a commitment.

The time out of school was a sacrifice and a commitment.

The homework was a struggle to keep up with once the course finished. I often felt discouraged when I couldn't keep it up and do it regularly.

But I am so thankful we were able to do this course. My child has grown in her ability and confidence in leaps and bounds (even though I know she still needs continuous work to help to improve more).

*Mother of girl in Year 2 when they undertook the program.* (Axford, 2005 p. 25)

As this mother's assessment of the difficulties to be overcome demonstrates, the high attendance rates attest to high levels of motivation and interest. Parents enrolling in the program are usually very aware that their child is struggling at school, and are often very anxious to find ways to help their child – even if this means having to 'go back to school' themselves. In this case, this initial motivation has combined with obvious learning outcomes on the part of both the adult and the child. This is captured in the mother's comment that:

My child would not have been helped so much without doing it. I would not have been so aware of where my child was at with her reading and writing or how to help her so effectively.

This mother's final comment ('even though I know ...') also indicates that she is now able to make a realistic assessment of her daughter's strengths and weaknesses. As a result she is likely to be less anxious about school assessments that she does not necessarily know how to interpret or what to do about.

### *The shape of the program*

Why have such a complex and demanding program? The answer to that question lies in the complexity of the task confronting those wishing to assist struggling or confused readers. On the one hand, the developmental and motivational issues that work to maintain and sustain children's educational failure need to be addressed. On the other hand, the complexity of the

reading/writing task itself calls for a more overt and structured approach.

In this program this complexity is reflected in the structure of seminars and tutorials. The seminar program is made up of two topics, divided into four modules:

- The impact of stress and mental overload on learning

The *Scaffolding Literacy* teaching sequence:

- Scaffolded reading
- 'Transformations' (for detailed language work, including spelling)
- Scaffolded writing.

Each of these four modules is briefly described below.

The twelve one-on-one tutorial sessions that the adult attends with their child put the theory taught in the seminars into a practical context. These tutorials have two distinct purposes, to:

- provide an opportunity for tutors to reinforce what has been taught to the adults in the seminars and to model the practices for the adult, and
- allow the tutors to 'kick-start' the reading/writing process in a way that enables the child to succeed at the kinds of literacy tasks their peers are working at (that is, at 'age-appropriate' literacy levels). This is made possible through the 'scaffolding' (or supported) techniques the program employs.

### *The impact of stress and mental overload on learning*

The first seminar module focuses on the impact of stress and mental overload on learning. The effects of stress on learning has a long research history (see, for example, Gentile & McMillan, 1987). For children who have experienced long-term literacy difficulties, many common remediation practices are unsuccessful because initial (and in some cases sustained) failure has had widespread consequences for the child's overall development. Gray (Schools & Community Centre, 2004, p. 4) describes the situation well when he writes:

Failure, and children's attempts to deal with it, profoundly changes the general nature of their personalities. These children see themselves as poor learners. They consider they have low intelligence. Their self-esteem in general is often very low and extremely fragile. They become disorganised in learning situations and are highly dependent on help from others. They employ strategies that involve minimal 'intellectual risk' on their part. Furthermore, these children become highly resistant to any evidence that attempts to counter this view of themselves. This includes evidence provided by remedial assistance. On the other hand, they are highly susceptible and responsive to any feedback that appears to reinforce their already low perceptions of themselves.

Parents and carers of children in this fragile state need to understand the psychological issues facing their children. In the program, these are

addressed under two broad categories: the impact of stress on behaviours, and the impact of mental overload on learning.

**(i) The impact on behaviours: The ‘flight’ or ‘fight’ response**

As most struggling readers and writers have already had considerable experience of failure at literacy tasks by the time they are identified as requiring intervention (even when they are only in the early years of schooling) this is a significant but often neglected aspect of literacy learning. Gentile and McMillan (1987) describe the negative ‘flight’ or ‘fight’ responses that result from learners’ early unsuccessful encounters with school literacy tasks. Most teachers and parents are familiar with the ‘fight’ response when students reject the task (reading is ‘boring’ or ‘for sissies’). Students who employ this kind of avoidance strategy maintain their self respect by taking no interest and being disruptive in class. Their motto seems to be if you don’t try, you don’t fail.

In contexts where actual flight is not possible or would put the child at risk of social rejection, a second type of response is observable. Gentile and McMillan identified this as the ‘flight’ response, but it could more adeptly be named the ‘abdication of responsibility’ response. Children who adopt this response adopt passive strategies to get by: they rely on soliciting help from others, especially supportive adults, and adopting a stance of learned helplessness. Learners who employ these kinds of strategies become ‘social learners’. They tend to be ends-focussed. Where those who adopt the ‘fight’ strategies are motivated to avoid the task at all costs, these children’s motivation is to get through the task as quickly as possible. Neither group is task-focussed – that is, neither group is motivated by problem solving and mastery. And neither the ‘task avoiders’ nor the ‘social learners’ are risk-takers as they cannot ‘afford’ (psychologically) to be seen to make mistakes. For the ‘task avoiders’ it is better to be seen as naughty than ‘dumb’. For the social learner it is more important to be accepted into the social group than to risk that acceptance through non-compliance. Neither set of strategies – those associated with task avoidance or those associated with compliance and learned helplessness – leads the learner toward mastery.

**(ii) Mental overload**

An additional stress – that of mental overload – arises from the complexity of the reading task. Readers with poorly developed decoding skills need to rely too much on their short-term memory to decode words. They have no strategies that allow them to see the reoccurring patterns in English words (for example, prefixes and suffixes, or common vowel combinations such as ‘ou’ and ‘oo’). Phonic awareness of individual letter names or sounds will not necessarily help with this pattern recognition. If learners have to address each letter individually to decode words, their word recognition will be too

slow for fluent reading to occur (Gray & Cowey, 2000).

Feedback from parents and carers indicates that help in understanding the stress struggling learners are under can greatly reduce parental anxieties, and can provide a valuable backdrop against which they can begin to change their own practices in relation to their child:

It made me realise how stressful the situation had become for my child. I was able to better recognise some of the protective behaviours my child had developed: i.e., not wanting to go to school on Mondays (spelling test day); not letting anyone see his writing; not taking an interest in writing.

*Mother of boy in Year 2 when they undertook the program.*

We were not aware about how stressful it was for a child to learn to read and try to work out each word. It was very beneficial for us when we were put in a similar situation [through the exercises used in the seminars].

*Mother of boy in Year 3 when they undertook the program.*

I used to get very frustrated when listening to my child read. Now I have an understanding of why he reads like he does. I have become a lot more accepting of who my child is.

*Mother of boy in Year 3 when they undertook the program.*

(Axford, 2005, pp. 11–12)

### ***The Scaffolding Literacy teaching sequence***

Modules 2–4 of the parent seminars focus on the *Scaffolding Literacy* approach to literacy learning. The teaching sequence is designed to integrate reading, spelling and syntax (grammar) and writing. There is insufficient space to do justice to the complexity of this level of integration, and only brief outlines of each aspect of the sequence can be provided here. The sequence is illustrated in Figure 1.

#### **(i) Scaffolding reading through text selection and orientation to the book or passage**

This aspect of the teaching sequence focuses on how the adult can:

- select an appropriate text to work on with their child (note that the adult does the selecting, not the child) and
- introduce the book or book passage to the child (a storybook or adolescent novel matched to the student's age – not their current reading level).

The texts children work on in the program are chosen on the basis of their 'literate language' – that is to say, the language structures need to be sufficiently complex and rich that 'author intention' can be explicitly discussed with the child as a way of making the structure of written language overt. This generally means using narrative texts (stories). This is in part because the narrative structure is familiar to both the adult and the child,

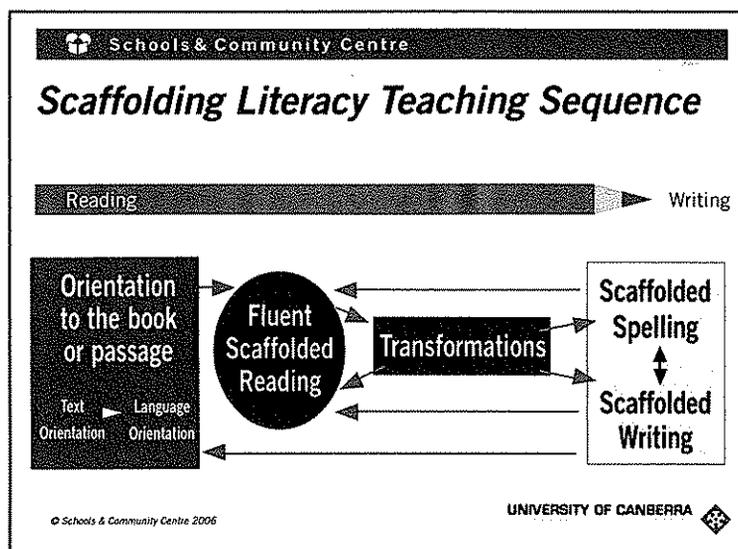


Figure 1. Scaffolding Literacy Teaching Sequence.

and in part because writers of good children's narrative books tend to pay more explicit attention to word choice and structure than writers of non-fiction. Working on 'literate' texts makes it possible for both adult and child to develop a shared language for talking about aspects of the text (for example, how the author positions certain words to build a picture of the character or the setting, or develop suspense).

The orientation activities the parents and carers learn are of two types: 'Text Orientation' and 'Language Orientation'. Together these 'pre-reading' activities make up the key strategies upon which all later work depends and, as the adult must take a leading (teaching) role at this stage, it is important that the adults prepare for this activity. They will, for example, need to read the story before they start to work on it with their child. The aim of these activities is to prepare the child for successful and fluent reading of the text by building up their ability to draw on meaning cues in the text (Gray & Cowey, 2000, pp. 3-5).

First, the adult provides an overview of the story. This overview will also provide author information, and information about what genre the story comes from (fairytale, legend, fable, fantasy, adventure novel ...). If the text has illustrations the adult will 'provide a literate reading of the illustrations' (Harders, 2006, p. 2). That is to say, the discussion about the illustrations should be purposeful and relate directly to the text and the language used in the text so that the child will be able to make use of information provided in the illustrations when they come to read the text.

Once an overview has been provided, the adult reads the story to the child, with the child following along by moving a plastic strip down the page as the adult reads. This helps the child learn to focus on the words on the page without the stress of actually having to read those words.

Following this overview, the adult draws the child's attention to the actual language choices made by the author through a series of highly focussed questions (this is known as 'Language Orientation'). These questions are not asked simply to test that the child was paying attention. Rather, they provide:

a constructive way to display, expand and distribute the common knowledge about the text and make it available to the student. Questions are only asked when the teacher [adult] is sure that the learner [child] will be able to answer them. In the beginning when very little common knowledge exists between teacher and learner, the teacher employs a highly supportive questioning strategy. (Harders, 2006, p. 5)

These strategies provide the children with a great deal of knowledge about the text *before* they are asked to read. When they are then asked to read they are more able to draw on both the predictive cues they have been provided with, and the graphophonic knowledge they have available to them, to read the text fluently and with comprehension. Reading text at this level in this highly supported way does not mean that any individual child is yet ready to read similar level text unsupported. It means only that *this* piece of text can be read at this level. However, this piece of text is now available as a resource for the adult and child to work on further. This further work takes us on to 'Transformations'.

#### **(ii) Scaffolding spelling and grammar through 'Transformations'**

This is a set of techniques, first developed by Max Kemp, the founder of the *Parents as Tutors Program* (Kemp, 1985b) and further developed by Gray and Cowey (2000, pp. 9–13). Transformations allow the adult and child to work together on specific sentences from the text to 'scaffold' the learner's spelling and word and phrase comprehension. Punctuation, syntax, and other aspects of functional grammar can also be explained using this technique. This allows both spelling and grammar to be taught explicitly, and in context, rather than as sets of rules disassociated from text the learner can actually read and comprehend.

Simply put, the transformation technique involves the adult writing a sentence from the text onto a strip of card. The adult and child can then work together to identify the function of each part of the sentence and can cut the sentence into its component phrases and words. Various word games can be played with the cut-out words to ensure the child can read each word out of context. For spelling work on individual words, the child can identify and cut the letter 'chunks' (the common letter patterns) within individual

words. As with reading, the emphasis is on 'scaffolding' the tasks so that the child always has sufficient information to successfully carry out the task. This avoids the tasks becoming memory tests. The high level of physicality of the 'transformation' activities also helps the child focus on the actual words and/or letter patterns and thereby reduces reliance on memory and increases concentration.

### (iii) Scaffolding writing

Using text the learner is now very familiar with as a model, the adult and child undertake various shared writing tasks that lead to the child undertaking his or her own 'Independent Reconstructed Writing' in which they work up their own piece of writing using the model text as a guide to prompt their memory of the language structures the author used. At this point they are 'writing like a writer'.

But writing is not the endpoint of the *Scaffolding Literacy* teaching sequence. Writing leads back into further reading. The teaching sequence is a continuous feedback loop where the child's own attempts to produce text (writing) enables more sophisticated comprehension of the structure of the next text the adult prepares them to read – using 'Orientations to the book or passage' and 'Transformations' – and perhaps now making explicit some other aspect of literate language that the learner has not encountered before, such as how authors use past and present tense, or build suspense or mystery. This more sophisticated reading of text provides further models for developing the learner's own writing, and so on. In this way, readers learn to 'read like writers', and writers to write with readers in mind.

### *Author intention and communication theory*

The *Parents as Tutors Program* (both seminars and tutorials) places considerable emphasis on what could be called the meta-analysis of a piece of text. This is most often expressed in terms of author intentionality: 'Why do you think the author chose the words 'slinking along' to describe the way Fox was moving?', 'How does the author let us know Joe was afraid?', 'You could use that technique in your writing when you want your reader to know how the character is feeling, couldn't you?'. This kind of conversation about a piece of text emphasises its constructed nature and helps the learner (both adult and child) see that reading text, producing text for another reader (writing), and producing text for another reader that is comprehensible and clearly conveys your message (spelling and grammatical construction) are 'all of a piece'. They are all part of 'being literate'. This emphasis on the choices writers make helps both the adult and the child come to comprehend literacy practices as purposeful and meaningful. Both children and adults can comprehend that literacy practices are purposeful even if *as yet* they are in the early stages of analysing how language works in practice.

Purposefulness carries with it the implication of human intent that underpins the idea of literacy as a social practice and practitioners (readers and writers) as active social agents.

As noted in the introduction, this emphasis on intentionality (or human agency) provides a rich illustration of the extent to which 'learning to be literate' is what Habermas describes as a 'communicative action' rather than an 'instrumental action' (Habermas, 1968/1976, p. 191; Pusey, 1987, p. 69 ff.). 'Learning to be literate' is, by its very nature, dialogical: it is about entering the human conversation as a reflective participant (either as a reader – the recipient of an author's message – or as a writer). This view of text stands in contrast to the view of reading and writing as sets of disembodied skills that some people are 'naturally' good at and, by implication, others are 'naturally' not suited to. By positing reading and writing as human acts of communication, the program has the potential to liberate struggling and confused learners from the tyranny of internalised messages that they are 'too dumb' to read 'real books' or write creatively. We see the power of this kind of teaching-learning in the many evaluation statements that refer to the adults feeling less frustrated and anxious and more empowered to help their child. We can also read it in the many statements about the child growing in confidence:

My daughter had become resigned to the fact that she was stupid. After the program she had the self confidence to try and she has improved steadily since.  
*Mother of girl in Year 4 when they undertook the program. (Axford, 2005, p. iv)*

And finally, it should be noted that the *Scaffolding Literacy* approach has been extensively trialed and evaluated in classrooms as well as in one-on-one teaching situations (Gray et al., 2003; Creswell et al., 2002). Under the title *Learning to Read: Reading to Learn* (Rose & Acevedo, 2006) a similar 'scaffolded' approach has been successfully trialed in schools with students in the middle years (Years 5–9) (Culican et al., 2006). In classroom situations, the teaching sequence remains the same – with the teacher taking a leading role at the 'orientation' stages and the students gradually taking more responsibility as the class builds shared 'common knowledge' about the text.

As with one-on-one learning situations, the process of building a set of shared understandings about how a text is 'manufactured' is central. Rose and Acevedo (2006, p. 41) describe, for example, a process of joint deconstructing of text at various levels ranging from patterns within the overall text, patterns within the sentence, and letter patterns within the word and then jointly constructing new text using the original text as a model. As in the *Scaffolding Literacy* teaching sequence, this movement is from building an understanding of the text as a whole, mining down into its component parts, then reconstructing overall meaning through writing.

This building of shared understanding about how a text is structured (at

all its various levels) carries with it the same message of human intent and human agency. As many struggling students often fail to see much purposefulness in most of the 'communication events' that take place in classrooms this needs to become a more prominent aspect of literacy teaching and learning (not to mention school learning more generally). Culican, Milburn and Oakley (2006) demonstrate that middle-school teachers from a range of discipline areas found that their students were much more able to participate in classroom activities, and produced more complex readings of factual texts, when teachers used this 'scaffolding' approach. This adds weight to the argument that structured (purposeful) classroom talk (or one-on-one talk) aimed at building more shared 'common knowledge' about a text helps 'scaffold' students into meaning. As Rose and Acevedo (2006, p. 35) point out, one of the strengths of this approach in school contexts is that it allows teachers to extend the learning of the most competent students in the class or group while at the same time improving the outcomes of 'at risk' students. This makes this a highly inclusive approach to teaching and learning.

### *Student outcomes*

Pre- and post-program assessment using standard miscue analysis on benchmarked tests of children in the *Parents as Tutors Program* consistently indicate that younger children gain an average 1–2 Year levels on reading scores. Older children typically gain 2–4 Year levels. Not all achieve these levels over the twelve weeks – hence the need for an 'extension' program. In recent years extensions have been offered to as many as one fifth of the cohort, but this in part reflects the increased number of children with multiple learning difficulties being referred from mainstream classrooms.

Not all children make it to the writing part of the program within the twelve weeks, but all do extensive work on 'scaffolded spelling', and parent feedback indicates that the spelling strategies, particularly the appropriate 'chunking' of words for spelling purposes, remains one of the strategies most often cited as continuing to be used long after the family have participated in the program.

### *Parent responses to the program*

In 2005 the 88 families who had participated in the 2004 program were surveyed using a mailed questionnaire (Axford, 2005). Fifty one of the 88 surveyed (or 58 per cent) responded. No information was collected on the socio-economic status of families or on the nature of the households that the children in the program came from. Anecdotally, it is known that a number of single parent, joint custody, and 'melded' families were included in the 2004 cohort. In addition, an analysis of postcodes indicated that both the cohort as a whole and those who responded to the survey were representative of a broad cross section of ACT residential areas (Axford, 2005, p. 3).

Because there are two program intakes per year some families who responded to the survey had completed the program at least eight months prior to the survey and some had completed about four months prior. Some families had participated in the main program in 2003 or earlier and were in the 2004 cohort because they were part of the extension program and a small number had carried over from the main program into the 2005 extension. As mentioned earlier, all families entered the program through referrals from their schools. Survey findings indicated a high approval rate among the parents for the program. For example, all thought that they had learnt new strategies for helping their child with literacy tasks and 90 per cent indicated that they and their child were still using the strategies taught in the program (and could name specific strategies they were using). Significantly, many survey respondents provided additional comments that suggested that the program had had long-term benefits for their families.

Survey comments strongly suggest that the program succeeded in promoting long-term benefits for families when, through engagement with the strategies taught, both the adult and child were able to grow in their sense of personal agency and in their power to relate differently to each other. The high number of respondents who reported that they continued to use the strategies illustrates this. It is also illustrated in the number who commented that they were no longer so frustrated with their child and that their relationship with their child had improved:

My child and I have struggled and fought with reading over the years and it was a very unpleasant time for both of us. Now my son reads every day because he wants to, takes books to bed, and is much more confident about having a go at reading anything. He is getting much more meaning and pleasure from words and now *wants* to read. We still have a long way to go, especially with writing, but we have a great base to work on. Our relationship has improved markedly when it comes to reading and homework.

*Mother of boy in Year 8 when they undertook the program (emphasis in the original).*  
(Axford, 2005, p. 27)

It is clear that, for this parent, the program has addressed both the adult's needs for more knowledge about how to support her child and the child's need for clear, structured, instructional guidance. Significantly, the child's literacy difficulties have become a collaborative project: 'we still have a long way to go,' 'we have a base to work on,' 'Our relationship ...'. This stands in contrast with the opening statement that 'My child and I have struggled and fought with reading over the years and it was a very unpleasant time'.

A high number of parents reported that the strategies taught were practical and useful and helped reduce family tensions created around homework:

Homework isn't stressful anymore. I can see when [name] has reached a point when no information is getting in or able to get out so we stop. No tears!

*Mother of boy in Year 5 when they undertook the program.*

Reduced tension both in our child and myself and therefore made it much easier.

*Father of boy in Year 2 when they undertook the program.*

Basically, before the program I had no idea how to help my daughter. The program taught me a lot of strategies. I now use the transformation strategy and chunking words to help her work them out. I've also stopped reading words for her if she gets stuck as I now know how to help her work it out for herself.

*Mother of girl in Year 2 when they undertook the program. (Axford, 2005, p. 14)*

The enhanced confidence of the parents is evident in these comments. The third quote also shows that this mother is now able to help break her daughter's dependency on others. Without the support the strategies allow it would not have been helpful for this mother to stop reading words for her daughter when the daughter got stuck. The child would have become frustrated or angry. The withdrawal of the mother's support in this situation has needed to be accompanied by a great deal of direct teaching (using techniques such as careful text and language orientations and 'transformations'), which has given the daughter the knowledge she needed about how to 'work it out for herself'.

What we also hear in the above comments is that this program has effectively taught the adults strategies that provide new ways for the adult and the learner to engage with each other and to work together in more productive and constructive ways. This has helped build the learners' confidence and willingness to take risks:

He now believes he can read, which encourages him to try.

*Mother of boy in Year 2 when they undertook the program. (Axford, 2005, p. iv)*

The fact that the children are succeeding at age-appropriate tasks also gives authenticity to their success (they know they are succeeding at 'real' literacy tasks rather than being praised for attempting tasks their peers could easily do). As noted earlier, parents had been taught how to give this kind of specific feedback, and its effect is indicated in the increased confidence and motivation shown by the children.

Some parents volunteered the information that they were using the strategies taught to them in the program to help other siblings with literacy tasks or using the strategies in other contexts. For example:

I have also begun to use my 'new knowledge' at school, where I have been helping with reading for the past 5 years. This year, however, I have started working with a Year 3 boy whose reading level is at a kindergarten level. We have already made some wonderful progress, due to the skills I learnt at the Parents as Tutors Program.

*Mother of a boy in Year 3 when they undertook the program.*

All strategies are in constant practice, not just with grandchild who attended the program, but with at least 5 other grandchildren - your notes have been photo-

copied and my children and myself are helping other kids.

*Grandmother of girl in Year 2 when they undertook the program.* (Axford, 2005, p. 15)

Other respondents observed that they used the strategies to help their children work through homework tasks in other subject areas before starting on the task. One of these parents identified maths as the other subject area where this was proving useful.

In summary, one of the significant findings of the study of parent perceptions of the value of the program for their family is that, through the rigorous and structured *Scaffolding Literacy* teaching sequence, the *Parents as Tutors Program* taught a significant number of the adult participants how to more effectively work with their struggling children and, in doing so, reduced stress and tension and created more space for independent learning to take place. In this process both adults and children grew in confidence. Building confidence is an essential element in building resilience in children and families and in helping them define themselves as active agents of their own lives.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has provided a brief outline of a somewhat unique literacy intervention. The program is unique in that it attempts to address the question of out-of-school literacy interventions for children with literacy difficulties from the perspective of their broader developmental needs. The program, in its structure and teaching-learning strategies, assumes that literacy tasks represent 'communicative actions' (in the sense in which Habermas and others use this term to emphasise the emancipatory, personal development role that dialogue plays). By teaching parents and carers how to engage with their children in a more structured and disciplined (less haphazard) way, the program demonstrates that 'learning to be literate' involves more than learning a set of separate skills such as 'decoding', 'comprehension' or 'creative writing'. This program represents a practical application of the concept of literacy as a social practice that can and should empower all those who engage with it. It demonstrates that struggling students need clear, explicit instruction. At the same time, it demonstrates that they also need sustained dialogue with supportive and knowledgeable adults if they are to be inducted into the wider human conversation of reading and writing.

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